

VZCZCXRO3796

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RUEHLM RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHVJ #2229/01 2920735
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 190735Z OCT 07
FM AMEMBASSY SARAJEVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7226
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SARAJEVO 002229

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DEPARTMENT FOR G/IWI (BOTTNER) AND EUR/SCE
(FOOKS, STINCHCOMB)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PHUM KWMN KPAO BK

SUBJECT: BOSNIA - WOMAN OF COURAGE NOMINATION FOR FATA
ORLOVIC

REF: SECSTATE 126072

¶1. (U) Post nominates Fata Orlovic as an International Woman of Courage for 2008. For more than 8 years, Ms. Orlovic, a Muslim, has been involved in a political and legal battle with the Government of the Republika Srpska (RS) and the Serb Orthodox Church for the return of property illegally taken from her during the 1992-1995 Bosnian War. Ms. Orlovic's defense of her property and her struggle for justice has established a standard for other returnees, many of whom are poor, elderly, illiterate widows like herself, who are struggling to rebuild their lives in Bosnia's post-war society. Her non-violent persistence in the face of nationalist threats to her safety, in addition to her steadfast determination against a legal system prone to manipulation and discrimination, has repeatedly demonstrated that Ms. Orlovic is a woman of strength and courage deserving of our recognition.

¶2. (U) Fata Orlovic has been battling RS and Serb Orthodox Church authorities since 1999 when she returned to her home in the eastern RS town of Konjevic Polje to find a Serb Orthodox church had been illegally built in her front yard. During the 1992-1995 Bosnian War, Serb forces ethnically cleansed local Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) and many, like the Orlovic family, went to live in the Srebrenica enclave. When Serb forces overran the UN-protected safe haven in 1995, Ms. Orlovic and her children were separated from her husband and taken to a town near the city of Tuzla where they spent the remainder of the war. Ms. Orlovic's husband, 22 close family members, and more than 7800 other Bosniak men and boys were then systematically killed in what the International Court of Justice has declared a genocide. Mr. Orlovic's remains were discovered in a mass grave years later, and he was buried with other Srebrenica victims at the Potocari Memorial and Cemetery in July, 2005 -- the tenth anniversary of his death.

¶3. (U) During the war, internally displaced Serbs from other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina moved into the houses and neighborhoods of Bosniaks who had been forcibly removed. The Serb Orthodox Church then built churches in these areas to service the religious needs of the new inhabitants and to send a nationalist message of Serb dominance. Illegal construction of the church in the Orlovic front yard began in 1996, following the signing of the Dayton Accords that ended the 1992-1995 conflict. The church was completed in 1997 at the same time that Bosniaks began returning to Konjevic Polje. This was also the same time that many Serb refugees began to leave the town. For three years, Ms. Orlovic struggled to have her house returned, but the Serb Orthodox priest who had moved into her home refused to leave until the RS Minister for Refugees and Displaced Persons signed an eviction notice. The original decision read that all of the Orlovic property should be restored, including the land where

the church had been built. Powerful Serb Orthodox Bishop Vladika Vasilije, however, allegedly intervened and used his influence to have authorities change the decision to read that only her house would be returned, and not the land encumbered by the church.

¶ 4. (U) Since her return to Konjevic Polje, Ms. Orlovic has tenaciously fought to have the church removed and her land returned. In 2002, she filed a lawsuit against the Serb Orthodox Church, but the RS courts have yet to issue a ruling on her case. She notes that there are no Serbs in Konjevic Polje, and therefore no reason to have a church there. The church is only used to celebrate Serb national holidays, which are attended by Serbs from neighboring towns and are intended to discourage Bosniak returns, frighten and antagonize non-Serbs, and raise inter-ethnic tensions in the municipality. Because of her outspoken battle against the church, Ms. Orlovic, who lives alone, frequently faces threats and harassment. She has received letters telling her to leave her property and stop her fight. On several occasions Ms. Orlovic has confronted the Serb Orthodox priests who hold services in the church, telling them to get off her land. For this, she was indicted by RS officials for "instigating religious hatred and intolerance." She was acquitted of all charges at trial.

¶ 5. (U) In June, the RS Government finally set aside approximately \$120,000 to relocate the church to a new location. There is concern, however, that the Serb Orthodox Church will take its time in relocating the church. In the meantime, Ms. Orlovic says she is determined not to leave her property until the church is removed. She has turned down generous offers from the RS and the Serb Orthodox Church to purchase the land, trips to see her children now living abroad, and an offer from the Bosnian Islamic Community for

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an all expenses paid Hajj because she says she will not leave Bosnia until the church is gone.

¶ 6. (U) Fata Orlovic's property dispute highlights just one of Bosnia's many human rights abuses requiring resolution. Her case has national implications, as minority returnee communities in all parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina face similar discrimination and harassment by majority populations. The Orlovic case, long iconic in Bosnia, has recently taken on celebrity status winning the attention of international media outlets like the Associated Press and the British Broadcasting Corporation. Although Ms. Orlovic may not be a typical candidate for the Woman of Courage honor, she has become a symbol of the Bosnian struggle against systematic discrimination, religious intolerance and injustice. We believe there is no better example in defense of human dignity than the indomitable spirit, strength and perseverance of Ms. Fata Orlovic.

¶ 7. (SBU) Ms. Orlovic has been notified of our intent to nominate her, and her personal information is as follows:

Full Legal Name: Fata Orlovic
Job Title: Pensioner
Date of Birth: Ms. Orlovic does not know when she was born, but thinks she is approximately 67 years old
Citizenship: Bosnia and Herzegovina
Address: Konjevic Polje, 75420, Bratunac, BiH
Telephone: 387-61-104-105
E-mail: Ms. Orlovic does not have an e-mail
Passport Number: Ms. Orlovic does not yet have a passport
ENGLISH